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SUBJECT: ADDRESSING THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE SITUATION IN THE  
BANGLADESH-BURMA BORDER REGION

REF: A. DHAKA 770

[1](#)B. IIR 6-925-0229-08

[1](#)C. IIR 9-925-0230-08

[1](#)D. CIA CLASSIFIED REPORT DATED 8 APRIL 2008

#### Summary

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[1](#)1. (U) Previous international assistance for Burmese Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has focused largely on those who have been formally registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While this approach has improved the well being of the registered refugees, it has three important drawbacks. First, it has not affected the roughly 100,000-500,000 Rohingya who are unregistered and live outside the camps. Second, it has encouraged a culture of dependency among the registered refugees. Finally, it has exacerbated conflict between the Rohingya and their Bangladeshi neighbors, who, in an already economically underdeveloped region, resent that conditions are sometimes better in the camps than in the surrounding villages. Our proposed new strategy seeks to extend measured support to the unregistered Rohingya, while also taking steps to expand livelihood, health, security, and education programs to Bangladeshis living in the vicinity of the camps. End Summary.

#### Background

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[1](#)2. (U) Reftels describe the current situation of Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar district and warn of the possibility that this vulnerable, predominantly Muslim population could prove an attractive target for recruitment into violent, religious extremist organizations. UNHCR has registered and provides support to over 27,800 Rohingya refugees. In the past year, the number of unregistered Rohingya residing in separate sites has increased from 10,000 to 15,000. Overall, the Rohingya population in the Cox's Bazar area may be as high as 500,000, with the vast majority residing outside of the UNHCR camps. Many Rohingya have been stateless for decades, and deteriorating conditions for Rohingya living in Burma has increased the rate of new migration into Bangladesh. All are vulnerable.

[1](#)3. (U) The Dhaka Steering Group - comprised of UNHCR, the U.S., and western donor nations - formulates and coordinates strategies on Rohingya issues. Donors have provided tens of millions of dollars in assistance to the Rohingya since the last large-scale refugee influx in the early 1990s. The international community shares one goal: to find a durable

solution to this persistent refugee situation. Interagency efforts should focus on how USG assistance could be better targeted to address the underlying conditions that exacerbate vulnerabilities to extremist influence, while at the same time supporting overall development objectives in the area.

Who are the Rohyinga?  
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¶4. (U) According to accepted estimates, between 150,000-500,000 Rohingya live in South East Bangladesh. They fall into three groups: 1) those registered and recognized as refugees, 2) those living in camps/sites that are not registered, and 3) those integrated into the general community. Approximately 27,800 Rohingya live in two camps administered by the UNHCR. These camps provide basic support, such as medical, shelter, food, education, and protection. The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) formally recognizes people in these as refugees. In contrast, the number of unregistered refugees is approximately 15,000, with at least 10,000 people at the Leda site and approximately 5,000 living outside of Kutapalong, one of the UNHCR camps. People in Leda receive support from the NGO Islamic Relief, which receives funding from the European Commission. Those outside of Kutapalong receive no formal support and rely increasingly on charity from refugees living in the camp. Finally, integrated Rohingya live in villages throughout South East Bangladesh. They share a common language and ethnic connection with Bengalis living in the Chittagong Division, yet during the government's voter registration

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drive in 2007 and 2008, Rohingya who could not document Bangladeshi citizenship were not allowed to register. In some cases, village cheiftans who had allowed Rohyinga to settle in their villages apparently feared government retribution and forced those Rohingya out of their homes and into the camps.

A Population in Peril  
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¶5. (U) Underlying conditions that contribute to vulnerability of Rohingya include: lack of access to basic education, livelihoods, training, community mobilization, shelter, legal status, freedom of movement, and police protection. Violent exchanges with local Bangladeshis may occasionally occur, further marginalizing Rohingya. In addition, Rohingya insurgents and questionable international charities have also been active among the refugee populations, further contributing to increased vulnerability to extremism.

¶6. (U) Significant political obstacles exist to changing the status quo regarding refugee treatment. Most significantly, the GOB has not officially supported the integration of Rohingya refugees into Bangladeshi society. While repatriation remains the ultimate goal of the UNHCR, the prospect of repatriation under current political realities in Burma is an unlikely outcome and many refugees do not welcome this option. Moreover, the GOB asserted that such measures would attract additional Rohingya to the camps.

Western Strategy at a Crossroads  
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¶7. (U) The UNHCR, supported by a Dhaka Steering Group (DSG) consisting of the diplomatic missions of Australia, the European Union, France, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, is looking at extending additional support to the Rohingya. Current efforts focus only on delivering assistance to the registered refugee population, but the DSG hopes to develop a more

holistic, district-wide approach. Key elements would include opening the camps by providing the refugees freedom of movement and the right to work. Additionally, unregistered refugees would be registered and receive assistance, but at the same time would not be encouraged to move into camps.

¶8. (U) The UNHCR has informally proposed ways that donors could assist in the refugee response effort. (Note: In some cases, these proposals recommend extending or expanding existing support provided through PRM. End Note) Inside the camps, UNHCR invited the USG to do the following:

- Expand skills training to include income generating activities.
- Ensure that current medical support, to include support to the disabled, remains funded.
- Expand community mobilization programs in the camps.
- Improve physical infrastructure in the camps, to include construction of shelters and interior roads.

¶9. (U) Outside the camps, UNHCR requested donors consider helping with the following measures:

- Expand access to justice by improving policing in the upazilas, or sub-districts, where the camps are located. This would include implementation of community policing initiatives, specifically addressing gender-based violence and victim support centers.
- Develop initiatives to limit the environmental impact of the Rohingya and find ways to involve the Rohingya in existing forestry programs.
- Expand access to education for refugee children by building new public schools in the area that would serve both Rohingya and Bangladeshi students.

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Where the USG Stands  
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¶10. (U) The USG currently has several development programs operating in the Cox,s Bazar area. They include USAID,s environment, health and livelihood programs, as well as PRM-supported health, education and livelihood programming to registered refugees. At this time, we want to expand educational opportunities to the 10,000 unregistered refugees near the Leda site. The PACOM Augmentation Team (PAT) is preparing the FY09 Foreign Humanitarian Assistance plan, which could make up to \$1M available for infrastructure projects in the area. Additionally, the PAT's Information Support Team (IST) has anti-violence programs that might also be used to assist in police outreach to the community.

¶11. (U) At the same time, USAID is developing targeted economic development activities in the Cox,s Bazar region. USAID supports the GOB,s protected area program under which the Teknaf reserve is a fundamental geographic focus. The official Rohingya camps are near or abut the Teknaf reserve, and parts of the informal camps are actually located in the reserve itself. USAID,s protected area approach includes co-management of the key natural resources with the local communities. Bangladeshi Forestry Officials as well as local Bangladeshi leaders have resisted including the Rohingya population in these efforts in any way. Previous USAID efforts to carry out livelihood activities and to introduce energy-saving technology in the camps were discouraged by both the government and the UNHCR for fear of attracting additional potential refugees. As noted above, the government and the UNHCR strategy has changed.

¶12. (U) Embassy Dhaka recommends that fugure USG efforts concentrate on the following:

-- Increase access to education by constructing new school buildings in the vicinity of the camps. Work with UNICEF and the government to allow Rohingya children to attend the schools. In addition, immediately implement a program for the unregistered refugees that would train women to informally teach in their homes, with mentorship from capable registered refugees.

-- Decrease the motivating factors that drive competition and violence between the Bangladeshi villagers and the Rohingya by expanding existing livelihood programs to focus on the parts of the district where the camps are located. This could include existing and planned USAID livelihood programs and the expansion of PRM skills training to prepare people for employment in those sectors. At the same time, improve community mobilization within the Rohingya population by supporting the existing community-based counsel system for conflict resolution and advocacy. Also, implement anti-violence and civic responsibility messaging in the camps and surrounding communities.

-- Decrease tension among local government, forestry officials, and Rohingya by reducing unregistered refugees, dependence on the forest lands for biomass fuel by providing them with high efficiency stoves and fuel. Additionally, look for ways to integrate Rohingya into the Teknaf co-management committee and include Rohingya labor in forestry initiatives that would channel Rohingya labor towards reforestation. (Note: The UN Food and Agriculture Organization, UNFAO, is developing such a proposal. End Note.)

-- Increase police protection for Rohingya by working with the police to implement model police stations that include victim service centers. Also, continue to exert political pressure on the GOB to reduce or eliminate restrictions on movement and work. Additionally, improve local border security through targeted and sustained assistance to the Bangladesh Rifles, Bangladesh Coast Guard, and Bangladesh Navy.

-- Increase awareness of civic rights and responsibilities through print media, sporting events, and local media that

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include environmental and anti-violence messages.

-- Increase the prosperity of the area by encouraging improvements in trade, fisheries, tourism, and agriculture sectors through existing and new programming, such as public-private partnerships.

-- Improve access to formal banking services to allow Rohingya to build wealth through work and remittances.

#### Risks =====

¶13. (U) This approach will raise a number of questions that will need to be answered. First, it is necessary to reassure the GOB that this is not a scheme to lead refugees towards Bangladeshi citizenship. Second, local Bangladeshi leaders want guarantees that the Rohingya population is not taking job opportunities away from the local Bangladeshi population. Third, to protect the Teknaf reserve it is important to involve all stakeholders, including Rohingya, in its preservation. Fourth, extremist elements could taint the best of efforts. Involving the religious leadership in Cox's Bazar, a traditionally more conservative part of the country, could be a good counter-weight. Inclusion of Imams from in

and around the camps under USAID's Leader of Influence program could assist in developing greater tolerance and understanding between the Rohingya and local Bangladeshi groups. Finally, Burma may see an improvement of conditions for its refugees in Bangladesh as an opportunity to open an escape valve and push more Rohingya into Bangladesh. Similarly, improved conditions in Bangladesh could serve as a magnet for disaffected populations within Burma. Border security as well as diplomatic efforts will need to be deepened and strengthened to stem a potential tide of new refugees.

Comment  
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14. (U) With this proposal, Post plans to expand our "3-D" strategy \* democracy, development, and denial of space to terrorists \* to include this vulnerable population and geographic location. Post's interagency, in this case consisting primarily of DOS, USAID, and DOD, have partnered together to develop this strategy. To the extent possible, we will use existing resources and programs in pursuing this strategy. Still, Post requests USG agencies and departments identify resources and programs to support this effort.  
Moriarty